

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



CNMP Win-Win For New Cattleman

A comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP) is turning into a win-win situation for Winneshiek County cattleman Pat O'Regan – by helping him trim input costs and reduce manure and sediment runoff.

O'Regan is a retired Army officer who, along with his wife and two children, purchased 200 acres of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) ground in rural Decorah in 2004. "I always dreamed of coming back [to northeast Iowa] and running a cattle operation," said O'Regan.

He approached the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help achieve his goal of running an 80-100 head organic cow-calf operation. O'Regan met with Winneshiek County District Conservationist Todd Duncan from NRCS to discuss an overall conservation plan for his farm. "We discussed a conservation plan to treat all resource concerns," said Duncan. "We immediately looked at options for rotational grazing and a CNMP, because of his need for an animal waste system."



O'Regan brought his family to rural Decorah in 2004. Next to Pat is 16-year-old daughter, Molly, and 13-year-old son, Brian.

A CNMP is a specific plan that addresses the management and treatment necessary for a farmer to protect soil and water resources, including manure and wastewater handling and storage, nutrient management, land treatment practices, record keeping, feed management and other utilization activities. A CNMP must be developed and implemented for producers who install animal waste storage or treatment facilities with funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

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EQIP is a voluntary conservation program administered by the NRCS that assists in the installation and implementation of structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land.

New Animal Waste System

With funding assistance through EQIP, O'Regan installed a 5,000 square foot concrete sediment basin, plus an 800 square foot stacking pad, to a newly constructed cattle barn in 2007. The basin helps prevent manure and sediment runoff, and allows O'Regan to more efficiently scrape, store and safely apply manure to cropland and pasture.



Pat O'Regan's 5,000 square foot sediment basin allows him to more easily scrape, store and safely apply manure to cropland and pasture.

CNMP Development/Implementation

Soils tests completed as part of his CNMP implementation show areas of his 100-acre pasture lacked optimum nutrients. "I'm able to use all of the manure and eliminate the cost of applying nitrogen and potash," he said. "My cattle may not be the biggest profit maker right now, but the manure they provide has great value."

O'Regan chose a technical service provider (TSP) to develop his CNMP. He says the TSP supplied a final report that provided test results and proposed how much manure to apply and where to apply it. "I now know I'm putting just the right amount of nutrients on the pasture," says O'Regan. (To locate a TSP, visit the online registry at <http://techreg.usda.gov/>.)

Rotational Grazing System

NRCS also designed a multipaddock rotational grazing system for O'Regan's 100 acres of pasture where livestock move from paddock to paddock, according to forage use. Rotational grazing allows pastures to rest and regrow, provides for a longer grazing season, more evenly distributes manure (fertility) throughout the paddocks, controls weeds and brush naturally, improves the quality of feed for cattle, and prevents soil erosion by maintaining a uniform forage cover. Rotational grazing can even help increase stocking rates.

O'Regan's pasture is divided into seven paddocks. He says rotational grazing allows for easier fall and spring calving, which is important since he mostly works alone. "I put my fall calving cows on one side and my spring calving cows on the opposite side and actually rotate two groups at the same time – staggered," said O'Regan. He says he plans to market the cattle twice per year to better handle the workload. He also plans to expand his grazing system when adjacent CRP ground expires this fall.

Fencing and Watering Systems

Fencing and watering for the rotational grazing systems were also financed through EQIP. O'Regan installed 14,200 feet of fence to establish the paddock grazing system. In addition, he ran pipeline to pasture to provide water for the cattle. Two permanent watering tanks are accessible throughout the paddock system, and he moves two portable tanks when needed.

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Roof Runoff Structure

He also built a roof runoff management system for his cattle barn through EQIP to keep storm water from the sediment basin. O'Regan says the roof runoff system is the best kept secret on the property. He figures the system may have already paid for itself. Heavy June rains could have caused severe erosion and structural damage on the property, but the roof runoff system helped prevent it. "The cost to benefit ratio on roof runoff management is one of the best of all EQIP practices," says Duncan. "Keeping rainwater

out of the sediment basin helps manage that entire area."

Organic Future

O'Regan is currently producing natural beef, which means he doesn't include any steroids or hormones in his livestock operation. He is waiting a few years to become certified organic until he can better gauge its cost-effectiveness. In the meantime, his operation is chemical-free. "I don't like sprays or herbicides," he said. "I would rather mow the weeds than spray them."



Winneshiek County District Conservationist Todd Duncan (left) talks to Pat O'Regan about his roof runoff management system. It is attached to a new cattle barn to keep excess rainwater from draining to the concrete sediment basin.

To learn more about a conservation plan to protect natural resources on your farm, visit your local NRCS office. More information about EQIP in Iowa is available online at www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/stateeqip.html.

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